

Managing childcare: The power of family-friendly and inclusive cities ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Not being able to manage work and looking after children at the same time, many parents (mostly women) are dropping out of the workforce as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. In the United States, more than one-third of parents have yet to return to jobs they lost, largely because there is no one to look after their kids, according to a December 2020 report by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation. Yet, it does not have to be this way.

In fact, many working parents from around the world were able to rely on their governments' childcare support. Notable were efforts in Australia and Denmark which rolled out aid at the national level in response to school and day-care closures according to Bloomberg. The result: the investment in childcare support enabled parents to join and remain in the workforce. Beyond that, both countries experienced an actual decline in the gender-gap of labor force participation. Take Australia: by having provided free care and funding to childcare centers, its female labor-force participation came back stronger than for men according to the Peterson Institute for International Economics.

This is in stark contrast to the United States where more than 2 million women have dropped out of the workforce since the onset of the virus. The urgency to solve for childcare is increasingly apparent to parents, their children, employers, investors and policy makers alike. Melinda Gates, in her recent 2021 Annual Letter, puts it this way: "Globally, a two-hour increase in women's unpaid care work is correlated with a 10 percentage point decrease in women's labor force participation. As governments rebuild their economies, it's time to start treating childcare as essential infrastructure—just as worthy of funding as roads and fiber optic cables."

When national governments fail to provide childcare support, municipalities and local employers can make all the difference. Here is how:

The case for smart and inclusive cities

Most will have heard about sustainable - or smart - cities initiatives which tend to focus on the environment (green buildings, energy, urban planning, etc.), mobility, safe and healthy infrastructure, transparent and efficient government, jobs and culture. What is clear is that smart cities also tend to be inclusive cities that support care services as priority.

When women and families thrive, local business communities are also better-off: they can count on a more reliable and productive workforce. Furthermore, residents with an income represent a sound consumer base for services and products - with women known to globally make over 85% of all consumer purchasing decisions. In turn, more stable local economies also make for better taxpayers that can help finance public services that work for all.

In addition to the benefits of job creation, some cities have also actively been providing childcare support to protect and invest in the children of refugees and homeless populations. They know that children who have access to early childhood education are more likely to perform well in school, be healthier, and be more productive as adults.

Women transform cities

While local governments traditionally play an important role in entrepreneurship, workforce development and homeownership, too often local policies and programs do not create equitable outcomes and/or economic mobility for low wage workers, women, immigrants, and individuals of color. In last week's Washington Post op-ed, U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris stressed that "without affordable and accessible childcare, working mothers are forced to make an unfair choice." To ensure that women and men equally benefit from public services, organizations have called on local and national governments to institute policies and practices that are women-/family-friendly. At the municipality level, such initiatives have often been led by female mayors and politicians.

Take the example of Germany's Berlin - City of Women Initiative (Überparteiliche Fraueninitiative Berlin - Stadt der Frauen e.V.). In the early 1990s, a leading female politician of the Free Democratic Party, Carola von Braun, realized that Berlin's male-dominated parliament could benefit more from women's perspectives in policies and programs. The Berlin - City of Women Initiative was born, soon expanded across political parties, and today includes civil society representatives as well as other prominent female members of society to inform

the city state's public policy of women's needs. Just recently the Berlin - City of Women initiative encouraged parliamentarians to conduct a corona impact study (to be released in the spring of 2021) to better understand the challenges of and opportunities for women and men in the city.

While the United States is one of only a handful of countries that have not ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (also referred to as the international bill of rights for women), the City of Pittsburgh in the state of Pennsylvania is one of a few U.S. cities that committed to the Cities for CEDAW Campaign and has applied the Cities for CEDAW Toolkit to inform its work. Based on this framework - and given that the coronavirus pandemic has disproportionately affected women and people of color - Pittsburgh's Gender Equity Commission recently put forward new policy recommendations and action plans which include a focus on expanding childcare provisions in the city.

In Pittsburgh, municipality-enabled childcare services are available to city employees in their main office location with the explicit goal to ensure high quality government services to Pittsburgh's residents. Tiffini Simoneaux, youth and education manager in the office of equity affirms that city-supported childcare services are making a difference: "There are so many benefits associated with childcare support - not the least of which is an investment in our future generations. As an employer, our city also sees a strong business case for employer-supported childcare that can translate into lower absenteeism, higher retention and productivity of staff." What's more is that the city provides on-site childcare for constituents attending city community meetings to encourage civic engagement and promote diverse (parents') voices in the policy making process. This in turn informs all the other aspects that make cities smart cities.

India, despite being one of the fastest-growing major economies, has one of the largest gender gaps in labor force participation in the world. Here, the female labor force participation rate is just 27% and women contribute only 17% of gross domestic product. In February 2020, the Indian cities of Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru found themselves near the bottom of a World Bank list that ranked cities from around the world according to their gender inclusion. Factors such as access, mobility, safety from violence, health, hygiene, and climate resilience were among the indicators taken into account. Recognizing that women's economic participation is key to its economic development, Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation revised its 2034 Development Plan which now focuses on how to make the commercial capital of Mumbai friendlier for women in several crucial ways. Among Mumbai's promising key initiatives: the provision of childcare centers in 23 wards, with construction of the first childcare facilities already near completion as per the Times of India.

At the global level, a concept for a Women Friendly Cities Challenge Project was first introduced at the 2016 United Nations Habitat III by the Women Transforming Cities (WTC) International Society. Its goal is to encourage cities around the world to become more women-friendly in line with internationally agreed upon frameworks with a focus on equal access to services including housing, education, justice and medical treatment, participation in decision making and leadership.

"I cannot stress enough the importance of being holistic and putting a gendered-intersectionality lens on all dimensions of urban planning," says Dr. Joy Masuhara, co-chair Women Transforming Cities. "At WTC we house an international collaborative Library of Wise Practices across 16 categories that has inspired policy makers and city planners to become smarter in their overall service delivery. Care plays a hugely important factor in making cities more family-friendly, not just for women but all members of the community." As an example, she highlights Vancouver's A City for All Women: Women's Equity Strategy 2018-2028 which leverages and aligns with Vancouver's other city initiatives including Healthy City and Housing Vancouver to specifically take action to increase women's safety and affordable housing while also addressing the impact of the childcare shortage on women's economic participation.

The way forward

As countries rebuild for the better, municipalities can play an important role in prioritizing childcare support and making cities more family-friendly.

Tonja Rucker, director of early childhood success at the National League of Cities (which represents the voice of America's cities, towns and villages and more than 200 million people across the United States) remains optimistic: "Even when budgets are tight and during an economic recession, we've seen early childhood investments increase," she said. "And nothing gets policymakers' 'competitive juices flowing' better than when they see colleagues and peers having success in other cities."

One promising city approach to solving for childcare support could be public private partnerships. In Pittsburgh, the city partnered with a black female-owned business to deliver childcare services while also promoting the entrepreneurship of minority owned-businesses. In the northern German city of Hamburg, voio, a leading German provider of care and family services for corporations (supporting more than 200 employers and their 300 thousand strong workforce) recently partnered with one of the City of Hamburg's public agencies (Zentrum fuer Personaldienste, ZPD) to provide care and family-services to their 400 staff. This contributes to making ZPD an "Employer of Choice." In fact, ZPD is known to be a family-friendly employer and received Hamburg's "Family-friendly Seal" (Familiensiegel, issued by a joint alliance of Hamburg's parliament, its chamber of commerce, and other employer associations) as the first public employer in 2008.

For larger employers and cities, tackling childcare is likely to more quickly translate into action given such organizations' managerial capacities and economies of scale. voio's CEO, Bjoern Wind, is more concerned about leaving smaller employers and cities behind. Here the leadership of smart city governments can be even more crucial: "Municipalities can play a huge role in assessing and matching childcare needs with services locally - including by providing regulatory guidance, offering referral services, and by helping form childcare partnership consortiums. This can result in smaller businesses partnering with each other and making smaller cities more effective and attractive to their residents." Initiatives like Germany's Family-friendly Communities (Verein Familiengerechte Kommune e.V.) or UNICEF Germany's Children-Friendly Municipality Initiative are a good place to compare notes and share best practice knowledge.

"Family-friendly workplaces and shared childcare can be a great enabler and equalizer for women's labor force participation" notes Eva

Maria Scheid of the European Women's Management Development International Network (EWMD) which in Germany is one of 17 women's organizations that signed the Berliner Erklärung in 2017 to call on the national government to promote gender equality in leadership and access to resources. "Retaining mothers in the labor force also promotes the number of women in leadership and helps employers realize the business case of diversity."

As 2021 International Women's Day is approaching, for those cities interested in promoting women's leadership in the context of smart cities, UN Habitat will soon be launching their Her City toolbox, an open source digital platform that guides urban actors and decision-makers in strengthening girls' and young women's participation in urban planning and design processes.

While various cities have shown innovative leadership in tackling childcare - including through public private partnerships - the direct and indirect benefits to parents, children, employers and communities often remain underestimated. What is clear is that as municipalities embark on their journey to invest in care and make cities more inclusive, measuring the return on investments (including the opportunity cost of foregone incomes and taxes) will help demonstrate the impact of such initiatives for other cities to follow.

Region: United States ^[3]

Tags: female labour force participation ^[4]

care work ^[5]

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